

**The Rashomon Effect and Fake News:  
Teaching Critical Writing Skills in the Digital Age\***

**羅生門効果とフェイクニュース  
デジタル時代におけるクリティカル・ライティング教育**

**クレイグ・ジェイコブソン**

**Craig K. Jacobsen**

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## Abstract

This paper discusses the concept of the Rashomon effect and its application to a process-based writing project designed to use the film *Rashomon* to teach English and critical skills to university English majors in Japan. The project emerged due to a belief that the students needed assistance in improving their English writing skills and developing the critical skills necessary to gather, evaluate, analyze and present information prior to learning how to write a graduation thesis in English with citations and references. The film *Rashomon* portrays four contradictory stories told by four witnesses regarding the death of a samurai and has engendered the concept of the Rashomon effect that has been used as an epistemological framework in a variety of academic fields. As applied in this process writing project, the students are first instructed on how to look for the Rashomon effect in the film. They then view the film, discuss it and the Rashomon effect and finally write multiple drafts on it. The paper concludes that with sufficient guidance and rewrites, all students will succeed in improving their English writing skills and most will come to appreciate the need to more critically evaluate sources.

## 1 Introduction

The current cohort of Japanese college students, having lived their whole lives in the digital era of the Internet and much of their lives with a smartphone in their hands or close at hand, instinctively turn to digital sources when asked to search for information on which to base their research papers. Unfortunately, the ease with which one can upload information to the Internet has meant that students are exposed to a great deal of information of questionable veracity. Twenty-four-hour news feeds and social networking sites as well as more permanent websites have encouraged the growth of multiple, competing and contradictory sources of information on breaking developments in addition to long standing, complex and controversial issues. While the notion of fake news as a social and political construct is most closely associated with Donald Trump and the United States, the term “fake news” has become part of the lexicon of the Japanese language. Both the construct of fake news and real fabrications of information have given new impetus to the need to help students develop the critical skills necessary to evaluate the increasing flows of digital information. Fortunately, the popularization of the term “fake news” has somewhat eased the process of doing so in Japan by providing a convenient and short reference point for discussion. The writing project discussed in this paper has been used to develop critical skills by introducing students to the Rashomon effect through viewing the film *Rashomon* and writing an English essay about it. The Rashomon effect occurs when multiple and contradictory versions of the same event are portrayed and is thus similar to the problem students can encounter when they are researching topics on which there are varied and competing opinions.

For the second-year university students majoring in English in Okinawa, Japan that are the subject of this study, and especially those who choose to write their graduation thesis in English, I have been faced with three challenges and addressing them in their second-year seminar. The first of these is the need to improve the students’ ability to write sentences, paragraphs, essays and research papers in English. Because English essay and report writing have not generally been taught in Japanese

secondary schools and is not taught as a part of the first-year curriculum at that university, the second-year seminar instructors have been tasked with this work. The second problem is that many of the students are unfamiliar with how to format a report written in English, specifically the formatting of font types and sizes, line spacing, page numbering and paragraphs and the use of a cover page. Finally, and most importantly, I have come to realize the need to assist students in understanding how to gather and critically evaluate information prior to presenting it in a paper. As a project designed to deal with these specific problems, it should therefore be understood that it is a precursor to a later project to teach students how to produce a paper with proper citations and references.

In order to address the above three challenges, a process-based writing program has been developed and employed for more than ten years to assist students in writing a report in English on the film *Rashomon*. There are several reasons for choosing a film rather than a book and for choosing this film in particular. This is in part because many students have grown accustomed to and prefer obtaining their information in audio-visual forms such as films, television programs, and Internet based media. In addition, well-made films can maintain student interest during viewing and leave an indelible print on them, partly because of the stories but also because of the skills of the filmmakers in their use of light, sound, music, drama and the skills of the actors. Finally, by showing a film in class, one can also confirm that the students have all seen and heard the material prior to beginning the writing process. Previously, when reading assignments were made prior to a discussion or writing exercise, it was difficult to ensure that the students had all completed the reading.

The rapid growth of Internet based sources of information and student preference for these sources is an issue common to many teachers who are responsible for teaching research paper writing. Prior to increasing my level of guidance in this area, it was common for students to submit bibliographies for research papers that included only websites, many of which were of questionable value. An increased focus on introducing students to the problems associated with digital sources and a sole reliance on them was thus considered necessary. For the purposes of this writing project, two of these problems are addressed. The first is the problem of superficial, misleading, undocumented, inaccurate and wholly fabricated information. As mentioned above, because the expression “fake news” has increasingly become part of the Japanese vernacular, this has somewhat simplified student understanding of this problem. The second of these problems is plagiarism that occurs due to the ease of cutting and pasting English from the Internet directly to their papers. The methods employed to address these two problems are detailed later in this paper.

The film *Rashomon* was chosen as it meets several needs of this project, especially the need to teach students to critically evaluate information. To begin with, the director of the film, the film itself, the author of the short story *In a Grove* (*Yabu no Naka*) on which the film is based and the short story itself are familiar to many Japanese students. Akira Kurosawa was the first Japanese director to gain international fame following World War II, and his film *Rashomon* was the film associated with that

initial recognition. The short story by Ryunosuke Akutagawa has been included in Japanese secondary school textbooks and one of the two most famous literary prizes in Japan is named after Akutagawa. Because of this level of familiarity and fame, the students recognize that the original story and film are highly valued both internationally and in their own society. Despite its fame, most students have never seen the film. This can, however, be an advantage as it has been argued that the impact of the film on first time viewers is one aspect of the Rashomon effect (Anderson 2016b). Another advantage of using this film is that it is in Japanese and can be shown with Japanese subtitles, so although some of the language is rather archaic, and the story itself can leave some viewers rather baffled, Japanese students have no significant problem understanding it due to language difficulties. Because an English translation of *In a Grove* is available on the Internet and only approximately 3500 words long, the students are asked to read the translation prior to watching the movie. This introduces them to English vocabulary specific to this story that they can later use when writing about the film. The original Japanese versions of the short stories *In a Grove* and *Rashomon* are also readily available to them, and the students are encouraged to read them if they wish to better understand the original stories in their own language. Finally, the most important reason for choosing this film is that I have found that the Rashomon effect one experiences when viewing the film has proven useful in developing the ability of students to more critically evaluate the information they will encounter when they begin work on research papers that involve gathering, reading and evaluating materials prior to writing.

## **2 The Rashomon Effect(s) as Cinematic Experience and Epistemological Framework**

Prior to examining the application of the Rashomon effect to this English writing project, it is important to acknowledge that there are at least two separate but related Rashomon effects. The first of the two Rashomon effects is what occurs when one views the film for the first time. A related, but somewhat different second Rashomon effect is what later emerged to form what Anderson (2016a) describes as, “an epistemological framework – or ways of thinking, knowing and remembering” (p. 250) that has been used as a critical tool in a variety of academic fields and applied to this writing project. In addition, it is also important to consider the extent to which this second Rashomon effect is a product of the original intentions of the director, both in terms of his design of the cinematic experience and his intended messages on human ego and subjective truth. Although this paper is ultimately unable to resolve the question of the relationship between the Rashomon effect as epistemological framework and the original intentions of Kurosawa, I am inclined to believe that when that relationship is better understood, it is likely to further strengthen rather than weaken the value of the Rashomon effect as an epistemological framework.

The first Rashomon effect is the profound impact that the film itself has on those who view it for the first time. Indeed, were the film not so well made, it is likely that the expression “Rashomon effect” would not have become a part of the English language and that the Rashomon effect would not have become an epistemological framework for academic research. To a certain extent then, the later emergence of the effect as an epistemology is directly related to the design of the cinematic

experience conceived and carried out by Kurosawa and his collaborators on the film. The screenplay, directing, acting, cinematography, music and sets all combine to thrust viewers into an uncomfortable yet thought-provoking realm where they experience the Rashomon effect that implores one to consider what has occurred and the meaning behind it. This initial Rashomon effect caused *Rashomon* to be the first Japanese film to win major international awards following World War II (the Venice Film Festival Golden Lion in 1951 followed by an Academy Award in 1952). The numerous attempts to reproduce the Rashomon effect by retelling the story of *Rashomon* the film in other films, plays, television productions, operas, radio productions, fiction and music also attest to the power of this first Rashomon effect and the influence this seminal work of filmmaking has had (See Appendix II in Davis, Anderson & Walls 2016, pp. 159-167).

In terms of the messages to be learned and applied from *Rashomon* outside of the realm of filmmaking, there are at least two, the original intent of Kurosawa and the Rashomon effect that emerged later as an epistemological framework. The first is Kurosawa's intention to use the film as a commentary on questions of morality, humanism and subjective truth. According to Richie (2016), a renowned authority on Kurosawa, morality and humanism are both common themes in the films of Kurosawa and found in *Rashomon* (pp. 117-118). Richie (1998) also writes that Kurosawa's intent in *Rashomon* was not to reveal the truth of the incident involving the death of the samurai but rather to use the notion of subjective truth to reveal something about the characters themselves (p. 75). When the students engaged in this writing project are first asked what they believe Kurosawa's message to be following their initial viewing of the film, they most commonly reply that they believe that Kurosawa is making a statement on how humans will lie to protect themselves and portray themselves in the best possible light. With further discussion and thought, and through the process of rewriting their essays, some also note that Kurosawa is saying that there ultimately is hope for humankind. This hope was missing in the original work by Akutagawa and included by Kurosawa. He did so through the addition of an abandoned baby that is found and rescued at the end of the film and through the use of music and changing weather, also at the end. Perhaps because the question of subjective truth, the possibility that the witnesses believe what they are saying to be true, has not been addressed in the project, students have never addressed this question in their essays (See Postscript). Kurosawa himself related that his intention with *Rashomon* was to produce a movie on what Makinster (2015) has described as the "quicksand of ego". In an attempt to explain the meaning of the script to his three assistant directors, Kurosawa (1983) stated that,

Human beings are unable to be honest with themselves about themselves. They cannot talk about themselves without embellishing. This script portrays such human beings – the kind who cannot survive without lies to make them feel they are better people than they really are ... Egoism is a sin the human being carries with him from birth; it is the most difficult to redeem. This film is like a strange picture scroll that is unrolled and displayed by the ego. You say that you can't understand this script at all, but that is because the human heart itself is impossible to understand (p. 183).

Kurosawa's intention to focus on human ego and subjective truth might be seen to be separate and distinct from the second message commonly associated with the film, that of the epistemology of the latter Rashomon effect. This second Rashomon effect may thus not have been the original intention of Kurosawa. Indeed, the term was most likely coined by the anthropologist Nur Yalman in 1966, some fifteen years after the film was released (Anderson 2006b, p. 252). At the same time, because Kurosawa both co-wrote the screenplay and directed the film, he is clearly responsible for the initial Rashomon effect, and the latter Rashomon effect would thus not exist without Kurosawa. What then is the connection between Kurosawa's intention to deal with human ego and subjective truth and the subsequent emergence of the Rashomon effect as a concept with implications beyond the realm of filmmaking and *Rashomon* the film? Was this later Rashomon effect something that academic viewers later created from the film? Or rather, was this later Rashomon effect a cinematic and literary tool created by Kurosawa that used depictions of subjective truth to expose the foibles of the human ego and not picked up on by academics until some years after the film was released? Finally, Richie (1998) also relates that Akutagawa, in *In a Grove*, was also concerned with the relative nature of truth (p. 71). The possible contribution of Akutagawa to the Rashomon effect thus also warrants study.

From the above discussion, we can see that our understanding of the Rashomon effect is likely to benefit from a better understanding of the relationship between the original intentions of the director and the subsequent development of the concept of the Rashomon effect as epistemology. In the meantime, the concept of the Rashomon effect has been given sufficient attention by researchers and others to take on a life of its own and be treated separately when used as a critical academic tool to analyze information and events. Until this lacuna is resolved, and for the purposes of this paper, the Rashomon effect as epistemology will be treated separately from Kurosawa's intentions. As stated above, I believe that the eventual resolution of this lacuna will only strengthen rather than weaken the validity of the Rashomon effect as an epistemological framework.

The examination and use of the Rashomon effect as an epistemological framework in this paper details the complexity and value of the effect in terms of defining what the effect is, recognizing the usefulness of distinguishing between weaker and stronger versions of the effect, describing the extent of the influence that the effect has had on academic research, and showing the application of the effect to this writing project. In its commonest form, the Rashomon effect has come to refer to the portrayal and viewing of a single event from differing or contradictory perspectives. This can be seen in the Wikipedia page for the effect where we learn that, "The Rashomon effect occurs when the same event is given contradictory interpretations by different individuals involved" (Rashomon effect, n.d.). Anderson (2016b), however, argues that the Rashomon effect is more complex than this most common understanding of it and stresses that it is useful to understand that examples of the effect can be placed on a spectrum from stronger to weaker. For Anderson (2016b), the effect occurs when there are three ingredients, the differing perspectives of the more common form, but, "particularly where such differences arise in combination with the absence of evidence to elevate or disqualify any

version of the truth, plus the social pressure for closure on the question” (p. 81). Regarding the placing of examples of the Rashomon effect on a spectrum from weaker to stronger, Anderson (2016b) states that these weaker or stronger cases are, “distinguished by the intensity of the interaction of the three ingredients” (p. 81). A playground dispute between two children over whether one of them was safe or out in a game with no additional witnesses would thus be at the weaker end of the spectrum. In *Rashomon*, Kurosawa has given viewers four differing versions of a death to meet the first ingredient or condition, the plausibility of each version to meet the second, the death of a samurai, not a commoner, to meet the third condition which demands closure and finally, considerable intensity due to the quality of the screenplay, acting, editing and other cinematic elements. These ingredients all combine to place this film on the stronger end of the spectrum and create a useful example for developing critical skills. Anderson (2016b) continues that,

the Rashomon effect provides us with an epistemology that applies to a special set of situations, tracks how we come to terms with the complex properties of these situations, and suggests how we understand or misunderstand them, depending on our insight. From this epistemology we can see precisely how we know what we think we know, and what we say, about this set of situations (p. 82).

The purpose of this *Rashomon* writing project being to assist students in more critically approaching their research and writing work, it is expected that by observing the Rashomon effect in the film itself, discussing it and then writing about it, they will gain insight into what the effect is and why and how the effect can be useful in critiquing how they form and present their conclusions in their academic work.

As a tool for analysis, the Rashomon effect has been used as a means of evaluating multiple and contradictory versions of events in a variety of academic fields. These fields include anthropology (Heider, 1988; Yalman, 2016), communications (Anderson, 2016a), media studies (Davenport, 2009), medicine (Crigger, 2014), and the analysis of an environmental risk dispute, (Mazur, 1999) in addition to other academic fields (See Appendix I in Davis, Anderson & Walls 2016, pp. 157-158). Based on my application of the Rashomon effect to this writing project, I have come to believe that it can assist Japanese university students in understanding the need to look for and critically examine differing and contradictory opinions. This comes from my observations of more than 200 students experiencing the Rashomon effect in the film, my supervision of their English essays on the film and then later supervision of some of their graduation theses. When students later conduct research on topics in the social sciences and humanities where controversies and contradictory opinions are often found, it is hoped that this understanding will be of use to them. For those students who have participated in this writing project, have later forgotten the lessons of the Rashomon project and are becoming too reliant on single or questionable sources of information in their research papers, a brief reference to the Rashomon project is enough to remind them of the value in casting a more critical eye at their sources and the conclusions they reach based on those sources.



### 3 The Rashomon Effect in *Rashomon* the Film

*Rashomon* is a black and white film directed by Akira Kurosawa (1910-1998) from a screenplay written by Kurosawa and Shinobu Hashimoto (1918-2018). The film was released in Japan in 1950. Based primarily on the short story *In a Grove* by Ryunosuke Akutagawa (1892-1927) that was published in 1922, the film depicts four contradictory versions of the death of a samurai. The short story by Akutagawa and the film are set in the Heian Period (794-1185) of Japan when Kyoto was the capital and a gate called “Rashomon” marked the southern entrance to that city. Akutagawa also wrote a short story entitled *Rashomon* that takes place in the same era at that gate. Kurosawa took the dark mood and setting of Rashomon Gate from Akutagawa’s short story *Rashomon* for scenes in his film and the title of the film itself. Both of these short stories by Akutagawa have their origins in the twelfth-century *Konjaku Anthology*.

In the film *Rashomon*, the dead body of a samurai has been found in a clearing in a forest off a main road. Six people are brought before a police commissioner as witnesses to give testimony as to how the samurai died. The testimonies are shot from where the police commissioner would be sitting, so viewers take the testimony from the perspective of that official. Following the testimony, two of the witnesses, a Buddhist priest and a woodcutter, are sitting under the dilapidated Rashomon Gate to take refuge from a heavy rain and discussing the case with a commoner. The commoner is uninvolved in the case but is also there to get out of the rain and expresses interest in hearing the story. As the various testimonies are related to the commoner by the woodcutter and the priest, the audience sees and hears the contradictory yet equally plausible testimonies before the police commissioner as well as flashbacks to the clearing in the forest to see each version of the death played out by the three principle characters, Tajomaru, Masago and Takehiro.

Tajomaru, a famous thief and womanizer, has been arrested for the crime and confesses to having killed the samurai with a long sword in a duel after luring the samurai and his wife to the clearing, subduing and tying up the samurai and then either seducing or raping the wife in front of her husband<sup>1</sup>. The wife, Masago, testifies that after being violated by Tajomaru and seeing the scorn in her husband’s eyes, she kills her husband with her own dagger while in the process of fainting and then runs away from the scene and attempts suicide but fails. The husband, Takehiro, speaking from the dead through a spirit medium, claims that he committed suicide after his wife was violated and he was left alone. A bounty hunter testifies that he found Tajomaru in the possession of some property of the samurai and suffering from an incapacitating pain beside a river and then arrested him. A woodcutter, one of the two witnesses who later meet under the Rashomon Gate, testifies that while walking through the forest on his way to cut wood, he came across a women’s veiled hat, a rope and an amulet

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<sup>1</sup> As the rape or seduction scene is depicted only once, in Tajomaru’s testimony, and with some ambiguity (some female students have suggested that it was consensual) and there are four separate and distinct depictions of the death, most students focus on the death over the assault on the woman (Matsumura 2016, pp. 61-62; Anderson 2016b, pp. 70-71).

before arriving in the clearing where he found the dead body of the samurai. He also testifies that he did not see the wife's dagger that had gone missing. A Buddhist priest, the other witness sitting under the Rashomon Gate with the woodcutter, testifies that he passed by the samurai and his wife while the three of them were travelling on the same road. Sitting under Rashomon Gate following his testimony, the Buddhist priest laments that the incident and the conflicting stories have caused him to lose his faith in humankind. The woodcutter also claims that the main witnesses, Tajomaru, Masago and Takehiro were all lying. After hearing the retelling of the conflicting testimonies, the commoner begins to suspect that the woodcutter has not told the whole story of what he saw.

Under pressure from the commoner, the woodcutter confesses that he did indeed view the incident in the clearing from start to finish and tells yet another story of how the samurai was killed by Tajomaru in a duel. In this second testimony by the woodcutter, none of the major characters, the wife Masago, the thief Tajomaru or the samurai Takehiro, come out looking good. The woodcutter claims that the wife insults both her husband and Tajomaru for their lack of manliness, goads them into dueling to fight for the right to have her and then flees without Tajomaru when he kills her husband in the duel. In this second version of events, Tajomaru is shown to be weak willed and not much of a dueler when compared to his own testimony. In a similar vein, the samurai shows a reluctance to fight for his wife's honor and is less than heroic or skilled in his fight with Tajomaru. Still suspicious, the commoner discerns that the woodcutter lied to the police regarding any knowledge of the dagger that had gone missing and then failed to mention in his second story that he had indeed stolen it.

The contradictions and evident self-interest in the testimonies provide students with multiple opportunities to critically evaluate the motivations that each character might have for the testimony they gave. Tajomaru might not be the brave and brazen thief and seducer he portrays himself to be. The wife might not be the demure victim she portrays herself to be. The husband, who depicts himself as an upright, brave and honorable samurai, may in fact be a self-serving coward more concerned with his own life and honor than that of his wife. Finally, the only third-party witness to testify as to the manner of the death, the woodcutter, gives two versions of what he saw, one in his formal testimony in which he merely found the body and another while sitting under the Rashomon Gate in which he claims that he saw a duel and the death and it is revealed that he may have stolen the murder weapon from the scene. The experience of viewing the differing yet equally plausible versions of a rape or a seduction and a suicide or a murder, one revealed after the other with no forewarning that another will be forthcoming, can leave first time viewers unsettled, uncertain and feeling the need to resolve the conundrum that is so skillfully presented on the screen. This is the Rashomon effect that can become an epistemological framework for teaching critical writing skills.

#### **4 The Writing Process**

This section details the process used in this writing project, including how it does not include all the steps generally associated with process writing and the advantages of asking students to all write on

the same topic. A process writing approach has been employed and explained to the students from the beginning in order to lessen their anxiety and ensure success for as many students as possible. The first step is to explain that the process is broken into different stages and that they need only write 500 new words prior to each submission date. They are also told that they will be given introductory sentences for each paragraph and that there will be sufficient time for individual consultation, additions and rewrites. Additionally, I emphasize that the focus is on intelligibility rather than grammatical accuracy. Finally, they are also shown examples of previous student reports from this writing project. It is hoped that this will combine to allay some of their initial concerns.

Prior to viewing the film, the students are given a worksheet of questions to consider and take notes on while watching the film (See Appendix I). These questions can be roughly divided into two categories. The first type of question (Questions 1-7) is designed to help students identify factual details such as who the main and minor characters are and what testimony each character gave. The second type of question (Questions 8-15) is designed to assist students in seeing, remembering and understanding the Rashomon effect as it develops before their eyes. Following the viewing, these questions form the basis for group discussions that are designed to help students confirm the basic facts of the story and begin to make sense of the unsettling actions on the screen that have given rise to the initial Rashomon effect. In the discussion, students are encouraged to clarify details in each testimony, share points that they can all agree on and share opinions on what they do not agree on. Each of the questions on the worksheet is in turn designed to become one or more paragraphs for which the students are given initial sentences and/or sentence fragments (See Appendix II).

Following the discussions and oral reports from each group on their discussions, the students are then tasked with first beginning to write paragraphs on the basic information of the story and then eventually write on the larger questions addressed in the film. For example, question 5 from the worksheet asks students to list the three main characters from the film (Appendix I). The initial sentences given to students that correspond to this question (also numbered 5) are, “There are three main characters in the movie. The first is … He is a …” (Appendix II). Once students have gained some confidence writing and rewriting these more descriptive paragraphs, they are next asked to address the more challenging questions related to the Rashomon effect. These include a question related to the film itself, “What do you know to be true about the death of the samurai, and how do you know it is true?” It also includes a more general question designed to develop critical thinking with regard to information they will encounter in the future, “How can you tell if something you see, read or hear is true?” By following from their notes on the individual worksheet questions (See Appendix I) to the corresponding initial sentences for each paragraph (See Appendix II), the construction of paragraphs dealing with single points is simplified.

As mentioned above, most of the students in this class have never written an English report of this length (1500 words). Although a few students have what might be termed near native oral-aural

fluency due to family environments or time spent abroad, many of them have never written more than single sentences and short paragraphs in English. As a result, when first introduced to the project, many students express concern regarding the challenge of writing what they perceive to be a long paper. However, once the project has been explained to them, and especially once it has begun, their anxiety regarding the project subsides. Students with a lower level of English proficiency (below Grade 2 in the exam administered by the EIKEN Foundation of Japan) and less experience in English writing will often finish all the paragraphs in less than the required 1,500 words. Students who have yet to grasp the meaning of the film and the intent of the project can also have difficulty producing 1,500 words. To deal with these problems and introduce the style sheet for the project, I distribute a style sheet, a list of possible answers to some of the initial questions from the original worksheet and some additional questions. Students are advised to use this to reconsider their answers to the questions from that original worksheet and expand their report (See Appendix III). This is generally done following the return of the first 1000 words. The class meets once a week for 90 minutes and the entire process takes from 12 to 13 weeks.

By having all students write on the same topic, the students do not experience two points commonly associated with the pre-writing stages of process writing. The first of these is the question of how to select a topic and brainstorm information in the pre-writing stages of process writing. The second shortcoming of the somewhat lock-step approach employed here is that it does not allow for students to write on a topic in their own areas of knowledge or interest. As the topic has been selected for the students and they have been provided with a worksheet to consider while watching the film and then when discussing it with other students, these two aspects of the pre-writing stage of process writing are missing. The result of this could be seen to contribute to a lack of motivation and creativity in their individual writing experiences, the encouragement and development of creativity being one of the hallmarks of process writing. Despite these problems, the reading of more than ten years of student reports on *Rashomon* indicates that this project provides some room for creative interpretation of the different depictions of the death of the samurai and the multiple messages the film conveys. Although some level of external motivation is provided by emphasizing the value of the project in their development as researchers and writers and the fact that the class is required for graduation, the project would benefit from the implementation of stronger forms of motivation. The missing aspects of the pre-writing stages commonly associated with process writing, how to select a topic, choose a research methodology, write a research plan and outline and write with proper citations, are dealt with in the following year.

On the positive side, there are at least four advantages to having the students work on the same topic. These advantages are related to feedback on rewrites, peer evaluation, plagiarism and the ability to introduce the Rashomon effect. The first of these advantages is that it is easier for an instructor to read all the essays when they are on the same topic and easier to provide feedback on the successes or problems that are common to multiple members of the group. In addition, the students are better able

to do peer evaluation of each other's English and other aspects of the writing process because they are all generally at the same stage in the writing process of essentially the same essay. As they are writing similar paragraphs on the same topic at the same time, they can more easily identify and comment on whether their peers are completing the various parts of the essay, factual errors they might find, as well as the question of the intelligibility of each other's essays. This peer evaluation time has also proven useful in having students teach each other the basic English formatting skills that some have yet to master. Furthermore, with the students all writing on the same topic, it is easier for an instructor to identify plagiarism. After several years working on the same topic, I have become increasingly familiar with the sources on the film that the students are likely to locate and plagiarize. Once this is pointed out to them, plagiarism generally ceases to be a problem. Students also know that following their submission of final drafts, they will be asked to write a summary of their report within 40 minutes in a testing environment as a final check on plagiarism. Finally, by writing on the same topic, the film *Rashomon*, an instructor can introduce the Rashomon effect and its usefulness as a critical tool at the same time as improving their English writing skills. To summarize, when students are all writing essays on different topics, instructors need significantly more time to read and discuss the essays with the students, the identification and discussion of similar writing problems becomes more difficult, peer evaluation might prove to be less successful and plagiarism would be more difficult to identify. Finally, in the case of this project, the application of the Rashomon effect to the development of critical writing skills would need to be separately addressed.

What follows here is a basic outline of the stages in the writing project:

- Introduce the purpose and content of the project and the two works to be used: the short story *In a Grove* and the film *Rashomon*.
- Ask the students to read the English translation of *In a Grove* and write the new vocabulary in their notebooks.
- Check the student notebooks for vocabulary.
- Distribute and go over the worksheet of questions to consider while watching the film (Appendix I).
- View the film (89 minutes).
- Organize group discussions on student reactions to the film, their answers to the worksheet and oral reports from each group on how they answered the questions.
- Distribute and go over the list of statements with which to begin to answer each question and begin each paragraph (Appendix II).
- Assign the task of writing 500 words based on the list of statements and submitting a draft.
- Read student submissions and then return them during individual consultations.
- Assign the task of rewriting the initial 500 words, adding an additional 500 words and resubmitting the draft.
- Read student submissions and then return them during individual consultations.
- Assign the task of rewriting the initial 1000 words, adding an additional 500 words and

resubmitting the draft; distribute a style guide covering the use of font type, font size, line spacing, margins, page numbers and a cover sheet and advice on how to expand the paper (Appendix III).

- Read student submissions and then return them during individual consultations.
- Assign the task of submitting a final draft.
- Accept final drafts of 1500 words (some students may need additional rewrites).
- Ask students to write a summary of their report in 40 minutes.
- Distribute follow-up exercises (Appendix IV).
- Organize group discussions on follow-up exercises.

## 5 Discussion

Measuring the success of this project is much easier in terms of evaluating student ability to properly format an English report and write intelligible paragraphs than it is in terms of evaluating their ability to understand the Rashomon effect and employ it to take a more critical approach to research and writing. On the former issue, I can confirm that all students learn to produce a properly formatted paper that is written in intelligible English and that speaks in varying degrees to the content of the film and the purposes of the project. In addition, individual consultations with students are conducted in such a way that I can confirm if students understand what English problems need to be improved and if corrections from previous drafts have been made. On the latter issue, the answers in the final drafts to the final question of how students can know whether something they read or hear is true or not do indicate that most students have learned the value of taking a more critical approach to knowledge. The following seven examples of unedited answers to this question come from the final drafts of student essays submitted in July, 2017 and 2018. They have been selected as examples of students who have acquired some appreciation of the importance of taking a more critical approach to what they read or hear. They are also representative of the range of student answers in terms of length and content. To demonstrate this progression, they have been ordered beginning with examples that demonstrate a more cursory appreciation of the value of a more critical approach and progressing through examples that demonstrate increasingly more nuanced understanding of it. The underlined words and phrases were highlighted as examples of indicators that the students have learned the value of such an approach. The most common responses of the students to this question can be distilled into the following five types of information that they would seek and analyses they would undertake in order to confirm the veracity of information they encounter. The first of these is their stated need to find multiple sources of supporting evidence that have persuasive power. The second is to consider the reliability of their sources of information, to evaluate that evidence and look for contradictions among the sources. This in turn causes some students to want to consult more objective third parties who are not directly involved in the issue. The fourth type of information they have come to value is physical evidence such as pictures or recording. Finally, some students, undoubtedly influenced by the cinematic nature of the project, want to rely on their own viewing of events in order to evaluate their veracity.

1. We can tell if something we read or hear is true if we can collect the information we have examined with our own hands.
2. I can believe that something we read or hear is true if there are some evidences about that and they correspond with the statement, otherwise there is no contradictory point in the statement.
3. We can tell if something we read or hear is true if you take various evidences. Because nobody can believe a fact from only speaking. In addition, I think that you should take third party which you could see or hear. It is so important to do it. Next, you should look for discrepancies in among the many facts.
4. We can tell if something we read or hear is true if someone would have picture and recording about the information. Also, we may believe the information that we heard from many people say it is true and that we heard from reliable person. In the case of information on the Internet, we judge that if it is true to surf official site and famous reliable sites. If these sites are known us the information, we believe it.
5. We can tell if something we read or hear is true if there is credible evidence. There was no credible evidence in this movie. Evidence was only testimony. Testimony is very important, but their testimony was contradictory. The persuasive power of each testimony was lost by their contradiction. I think that they need reliable evidence to believe their testimony ... Evidence and basis are necessary if you want something to believe in the testimony.
6. We can tell if something we read or hear is true if we have ability to judge. Nowadays, we can easily get a lot of information, but in that incorrect information is included too, so we have to judge about what is true, and what is wrong. In order to make a correct judgement, we need a lot of knowledge. To get knowledge we must learn. For example, reading books, talking with adult and person of the different field. If we do so it we can get a lot of knowledge, then we can make correct judgement.
7. I think there are several ways. We can tell if something we read or hear is true. First is investigate. We should use something else to get information. For example, book, internet, other person and some media. If that information is unknown information, it is important to investigate. Becoming certain by gathering more information. Second is confirmation. We must prove whether



that information is confident. If you are not sure if you can prove or investigate, you should not believe that information.

From the above examples, we can see at least two significant findings. Firstly, there is a considerable range of difference in terms of the amount of analysis and detail given to what is expected to be a key question in the project. Given that there are students who write only one sentence on this question, there is considerable room for improvement in achieving this key aim of the project. Secondly, these examples indicate that the students do understand, albeit to varying degrees, the importance of taking a critical approach to information in order to determine its veracity. In order to appreciate the importance of this finding, we must remember that most students begin the writing portion of the project by uncritically believing one of the stories over the others. Example #7 is especially significant as this student displays an understanding of critical thinking as a process with stages.

A follow-up exercise (See Appendix IV) was first used in the 2018 *Rashomon* project. The purpose was to reinforce the goal of the project to teach critical skills and discern the extent to which it was helping students understand that there are differing opinions on important issues and that they would benefit from taking a critical approach to any question that they might choose to research. It should again be noted here that while their initial reaction to the film is often to attempt to discern which individual is telling the truth, by the time of the follow-up exercise, most students had concluded that it is impossible to know what happened between Tajomaru, the samurai and his wife. This paper thus lends some support to the notion that it can take time, discussion, thought and rewriting to develop a critical approach to a topic. In this case, it entails coming to appreciate how the plausibility of each testimony and the contradictions among them make it difficult to trust any of the statements made or actions depicted. In the follow-up exercise, the students were also surprised to learn that some people believe that the Earth is flat, that humans never landed on the Moon, that the Earth is only 10,000 years old and that people who believe these things will strenuously argue these points with their own logic and “facts” in books, exhibits, conventions, websites and YouTube clips. I expect to continue to use and improve on this follow-up exercise.

## 6 Conclusion

In the process of writing this paper, it has become apparent that there is still much to be done to improve this writing project on *Rashomon*. The writing of this paper thus reinforces the notion that the writing process itself can be useful in critiquing and clarifying one’s thinking and actions. It also reinforces my belief that introducing the *Rashomon* effect to college students can be of benefit to them as they move through college and later in life. The most significant issue to arise in the process of writing this paper, and that will need to be incorporated into the project, is that while all students who complete the project have certainly improved their English writing skills, there are some who need more assistance in understanding the *Rashomon* effect as an epistemological framework for analysis and how it might be of use to them. This can perhaps be addressed in two ways. The first



solution would be to reconsider the way in which the project is introduced to the students and the questions used in the initial worksheet that is distributed prior to viewing the film. For example, a better understanding of the Rashomon effect might result from the addition of a question concerning differences between subjective and objective truths. The second solution would be to develop a better understanding of both Kurosawa's original intentions and the Rashomon effect as an epistemology that has come from his film and how the two are related. In writing this paper, it has become apparent that the intention of Kurosawa to convey a message concerning human ego is easier for the students to grasp and should perhaps be included in the project. As the two solutions are no doubt related, the implementation of the first solution will be incumbent on first resolving the second.

## 7 Postscript

Following the submission of an initial draft of this paper for publication, I added a question to the Rashomon writing project in the spring of 2019 that was designed to draw attention to the concept of subjective truth. The question asked students to consider whether the characters in the film knew they were telling lies or believed they were telling the truth. Perhaps as a result of this, two students, without my prompting, made successful use of the term "subjective truth" in the second drafts of the papers that they submitted. Based on this, and because several students were struggling to answer this question, the concept of subjective truth was introduced to all the students in class and will be covered in more detail in the 2020 project. Since submitting this paper for publication, I have also learned that *yabu no naka*, the Japanese title of *In a Grove*, is used in Japanese to refer to the inability to determine the truth because of conflicting testimonies.

## 8 Acknowledgements

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## Appendix I

### Notes for Discussion on the Movie *Rashomon* by Akira Kurosawa

1. Write a short synopsis (50 to 100 words) of the story on the back (include the historical background).
2. Who was Akira Kurosawa?
3. What is the movie based on (Where does the story come from)?
4. Who was Ryunosuke Akutagawa?
5. The main characters in the movie.
  - 1.
  - 2.
  - 3.
6. Other characters.
  - 1.
  - 2.
  - 3.

etc.
7. Different testimonies on the incident (How many and who).
8. Similarities in the stories.
9. Differences in the stories.
10. Which character(s) and stories do you believe and why?
11. Which parts of whose story are not true?
12. What do you know to be true about the death of the samurai? & How do you know it is true?
13. Was the death a murder or a suicide? Why do you think so?
14. What is Kurosawa's message?
15. How can you tell if something you see, read or hear is true?

## Appendix II

### Introductory Sentences for Report on *Rashomon*

#### Section #1

This is a report on the movie *Rashomon*. It tells the story of ...

#### Section #2

The movie was directed by Akira Kurosawa. Kurosawa was ...

#### Section #3

The story for the movie *Rashomon* comes from two short stories, ... and ... by name.

#### Section #4

Akutagawa was ...

#### Section #5

There are three main characters in the movie. The first is ... He is a ...

#### Section #6

There are # other characters in the movie. The first is ...

#### Section #7

There are # different testimonies on the incident. The first is told by ...

#### Section #8

There are # or many or few similarities among the stories. The first similarity is that ...

#### Section #9

There are # or many or few differences among the stories. The first difference is ...

#### Section #10

I believe the ... part of the story told by name because ...

#### Section #11

I do not believe the ... part told by name because ...

#### Section #12

I know that ... is true because ...

#### Section #13

I believe that the death was murder/suicide because ... I do not know how the samurai died because ...

#### Section #14

I think that Kurosawa's message is that ...

#### Section #15

We can tell if something we read or hear is true if ...

## Appendix III

### Notes for Rewriting Rashomon Reports

Is it written in your own English? Have you copied from another source (plagiarism 盗作)?

Formatting

Page numbers

Cover Page for final version (no page number) Name, number, date, title, class, word count

Times New Roman

12 point

1.5 line spacing

Use tabs for each new paragraph.

Write paragraphs, not sentences.

For example, tell us why you think it was a murder or a suicide or why you are can't be sure.

Think more about similarities and differences

For example, similarities:

people involved

locations

time

Tajomaru wanted Masago

Tajomaru tricked the Samurai

husband tied to a tree

rape?

death of the samurai

Masago ran away

etc.

Now, do the same for differences:

- how the Samurai was killed

- 

- 

- 

How do we explain the differences? Why are the stories different?

- pride

- love

- etc.

In addition:

What do we know about the period when this took place and how is this related to the story?

What are Akutagawa and Kurosawa trying to say in this story?

Does the music give you any hints?

Does the weather give you any hints?

Can you say more in your conclusion?

What is the role of the Buddhist priest?

Why did Kurosawa add the baby to the story?

Why did Kurosawa choose the Rashomon Gate as the setting for the discussion of the stories?

Are there places where you have repeated yourself?

Do you use the same name each time for the same person?

## Appendix IV

### Rashomon Follow-up

1. How old is the earth?
2. How many planets are there in our solar system?
3. Have people ever been to the moon, landed there and returned to Earth?
4. Is the earth round or flat?
5. How many people died in the Battle of Okinawa?
6. Did Japanese soldiers kill Okinawans in the Battle of Okinawa?
7. Why did Okinawans commit suicide on Tokashiki Island at the end of the war?
8. Should the Senkaku Islands belong to China or Japan?
9. How many Chinese people were killed at Nanjing from December, 1937 till January, 1938?
10. Who was responsible for the killing?
11. How many “comfort women 慰安婦” were there in World War II?
12. Were “comfort women 慰安婦” forced to work as sex workers during World War II?
13. How many people in Puerto Rico died as a result of Hurricane Maria (2017)?
14. How many “false or misleading claims” (similar in meaning to “lies”) has Donald Trump made since he became president? (see Washington Post website)
15. Which smartphone service in Okinawa is the best?
16. Will casino gambling be good for Okinawa?
17. Are the American military bases in Okinawa good for Okinawa?
18. Should Futenma Marine Corps Air Station be moved to Henoko?
19. Should English be taught at Japanese primary schools?
20. In what year of school would it be best to begin English studies in Japan?
21. Which group of English teachers is better, foreign teachers or Japanese teachers?
22. Did the samurai in Rashomon die by suicide, was he murdered or is it impossible to know?